

# TEEVADHARA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION



## THE CROSS

THE CROSS OF JESUS

*J. Pathrapankal*

THE CROSS AND THE NEW EARTH

*F. Vadakethala*

THE CROSS NOW AND HERE 1

*S. Lourdusamy*

THE CROSS NOW AND HERE 2

*Tom Kochery*

NESTOR PAZ

*S. Ravan*

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# JEEVADHARA

## The Living Christ

THE CROSS

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# Editorial

Jesus asked Saul: "Why do you persecute me?" The question came from Jesus long after his experience on Calvary, months and years after his resurrection from the dead. One would have thought, with Paul, that the resurrection had conveyed Jesus to realms beyond the reach of persecutors, jailors, torturers and death-dealers: "Having died once he dies no more, death has no longer dominion over him". But surely Jesus knows better. He knows that Saul's persecution reaches out and touches him in the regions of the resurrection. If his resurrection is the high-point and fulfilment of his incarnation, Jesus is today even more bound up with our earthly existence and all its smiles and tears. Saul can therefore arrest and jail him in arresting and jailing his friends and disciples, in oppressing and humiliating men and women with whom he is solidary. The resurrection is the final seal on Jesus' solidarity with humankind.

Jesus says to us: "What you do to the least of humans you do to me. Do you feed and clothe the naked and the needy? or do you grab their bread and strip them bare and rape their dignity and torture their limbs and lives? Whenever and wherever you do that, you do that to me. It is I whom you keep in poverty and want so that you can have cheap labour without which your capitalist economy will crack and crumble. It is I whom you exploit and keep illiterate, I whom you bid work hard (donkey-like) and talk less (also donkey-like), and threaten with the army and the police whom you maintain with the wealth my labour creates. It is I whom you wantonly put in prison, torture and kill, after labelling me a dangerous criminal after arrogating to yourself the monopoly of defining danger and crime, or bestowing the privilege on academies which you finance and uphold though with the money I make. You chain, control, manipulate, threaten and brainwash me in a thousand and one ways, through books and the press, ads and mass media, and education and public opinion and psychological devices, all of which are your marionettes for making me believe you are my benefactor when you let me build palaces for you while I lie in filth in the hovels of the slum,

or when you allow me to cook exquisite food for you while I eat dust and go hungry to bed, or to weave silk and wool for you while I sleep in pavements in stinking and tattered rags. What you do to the small men and women, to these nobodies, you do to me.

And I suffer. Today I am in Gathsemane, and now I am on the Cross in the 400 million Indians who live below the poverty line, who for over 40 centuries have slaved to produce the enormous wealth of this country for the benefit of its maharajas, ministers, pandits, professors, politicians and priests, but whose children are born handicapped, both physically and mentally because they and their forbears have lived, for generations, on poor and insufficient food. I am still on the Cross, hanging from four nails. I am martyred mankind.

It is the Passion of Jesus in the poor and the toiling masses of India and of the world, and their crucifixion on the economic and political and social and religious systems that this issue of *Jeevadhara* wanted to depict and look at. But it has to be confessed that the descriptions and reflections on the subject offered here are inadequate. The reason is that this issue itself has known the touch of the Cross, and its birth has been agonizing and precarious. I wish to thank all who have agonised together to produce these meditations, as well as those whose pain has not been able to find expression in these pages.

This is no learned disquisition on suffering, but an invitation to share in the agony of peoples in whom God's Humanity is still on the Cross.

Vidya Jyoti  
Delhi, 110054

Samuel Rayan



# The Cross of Jesus

"The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death. In his time the crucified Christ was regarded as a scandal and as foolishness. Today, too, it is considered old-fashioned to put him in the centre of christian faith and of theology. Yet only when men are reminded of him, however untimely this may be, can they be set free from the power of the facts of the present time, and from the laws and compulsions of history, and be offered a future which will never grow dark again."<sup>1</sup>

I have extensively quoted from an author, and that too from an author whose name has been celebrated as the 'theologian of hope', precisely because I want to share with him some of the thoughts which seem to be forgotten, especially in the wake of an optimistic world-vision that is influencing mankind today. Man does not want to suffer; he wants to escape suffering in all its forms. But the fact remains that the more he tries to evade it, the more he has to face it in other different forms. It is against the background of this phenomenon that it is worth analysing the abiding power and message of the Cross in Christian life as such and in the history of mankind as a whole.

What do we mean by the Cross of Jesus? It is the sum total of the Christ event seen under the aspect of rejection, betrayal, suffering and death. This aspect was part and parcel of the ministry of Jesus so much so that the early Church found it the most challenging reality of the Jesus tradition she had to build up to preserve the faith in Christ. Moreover, the Cross is approached from various angles, either as something which Jesus had a knowledge of or as something inflicted on him through the cruelty of his enemies. Whatever be the approach, in the last analysis the cross is presented in dead seriousness without the

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1. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, New York, 1974, p. 1.

least effort being made to consider it as a negligible phenomenon within the larger context of the glory of the resurrection. It is true that the life and death of Jesus are accessible to us in the sources only in the context of the interpretations in which his death was understood and recounted. They are primarily Christian testimonies. In them the experience of the Easter faith has become so intermingled with the recollections of the history of Jesus that it is now difficult to separate out the historical kernel. At the same time, it is still possible to see the retrospective historical understanding as different from the reflective understanding of theology.

### **The Cross as a consequence of Jesus' ministry**

Jesus did not kill himself; he was condemned to death and was crucified. So His death must be understood in the context of the conflicts between Him and the world around Him. His death on the Cross was not a fact without any reason, interpretable afterwards in any kind of way. On the contrary, those who inflicted this punishment on Jesus, had sufficient reasons for what they did. Those who were custodians of the law found him to be a blasphemer; those who held authority in the land took him for a rebel, and the words of the law, "Cursed is the one who is hanged on a tree" (Dt 21:23; Gal 3:13) were applicable to him without further ado. The career of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem was unusual and unparalleled with arrogant authority. Jesus proclaimed God as the one who in his eschatological condescension towards lost men is free from the human observance of the prescriptions of the law, and in prevenient love shows gracious mercy towards men. By doing so Jesus placed his preaching of God, and therefore himself, above the authority of Moses and the Torah. In the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount, in the call to follow him and his sovereign transgression of the sabbath commandment Jesus was trying to abolish the legal distinction between religious and secular, righteous and unrighteous, holy and sinful.

From this point of view, the life of Jesus was a theological clash between Him and the prevailing understanding of the law. From the clash arose the legal trial concerning the righteousness of God in which His gospel and the law were opponents. Hence he



did not die through chance or misfortune, but died by the law as the one who was reckoned with transgressors (Lk 22:37), because he was condemned as a blasphemer by the guardians of the law. As they understood it, his death was nothing more than the carrying out of the curse of the law. The conviction they had was that Jesus was nailed to the cross in the name of God who was regarded as the guarantor of the religious and cultic legal ordinance with which Jesus had come into collision.

Going a step further, we can also say that the death of Jesus was also that of a 'rebel'. Crucifixion was not necessarily associated with blasphemy. Stephen was not crucified, he was stoned to death. Jesus was crucified by the Roman occupying power. According to Roman law, crucifixion was a punishment for escaped slaves, as we know from the revolt of Spartacus and the crucifixion of more than 7,000 slaves on the Via Appia. It was also a punishment for rebels against the *Imperium Romanum*. Crucifixion was a punishment for crimes against the state, and one can say that crucifixion, at that time, was a political punishment for rebellion against the social and political order of the Roman Empire. Understood in this way, it is quite probable that Jesus was condemned to death by Pilate as a political rebel, as a Zealot. According to O. Cullmann, the Roman cohorts whose duty was to protect the temple captured Jesus in Gathsemane.<sup>2</sup> He was consequently for the first time a prisoner of the Romans who, as a result of his appearances in Jerusalem, feared a revolt. The true trial was the trial before Pilate, a political trial, made possible by the collusion of the Sanhedrin and Pilate. For Pilate, the case of Jesus of Nazareth was clearly on the same level as that of Barabbas, who was probably a Zealot; we read of him as a 'rebel' captured in the insurrection (cf. Mk 15:7).

The theory that Jesus was a member of the Zealot movement is as old as New Testament criticism itself.<sup>3</sup> H. S. Reimarus

2. O. Cullmann, *Jesus und die Revolutionären seiner Zeit*, 1970, p. 47.

3. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A study in the political factor in the primitive christianity*, Manchester, 1967; M. Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?*, Philadelphia, 1971; J. Pathrapāṅkal, "Jesus: Freedom Fighter or Prince of Peace?" *Indian Journal of Theology*, 24 (1975) 79-86.

(1694-1768) already proposed the idea. Robert Eisler in his *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* brought the theories of Reimarus into prominence for a time, and more recently Paul Winter in his book *On the Trial of Jesus* restated the argument. The fact that Jesus had been and is being presented as a revolutionist and freedom fighter is encouraged by several factors which the New Testament and the political situation of Palestine at the time of Jesus provided. Lk 13 : 1-4 has been sometimes referred to as proof of Jesus' involvement in some revolutionary activity. Those who look for Jesus as associated with the Zealot movement try to find evidence for this in the fact that Jesus had in his company a certain Simon the Zealot. Lk 6 : 15 calls him 'Simon the 'Zealot'. The word 'Zealot' was added to distinguish him from Simon whom Jesus called Peter (Lk 6 : 14). Whether, for that matter, he was a member of the zealot party is still a moot question.

The circumstances of the crucifixion of Jesus have been sometimes produced to conclude that he had something to do with a revolutionist party.<sup>4</sup> The political overtone of the event is further accentuated by the fact that Jesus was crucified between the *lestai* (Mt 27 : 38, 44; Mk 15 : 27) who reviled him. Luke calls them 'evil doers' and does not use the word *lestai*. Moreover, he has his own story of the penitent thief (Lk 23 : 29-43). The pros and cons of this theory point to one conclusion: the Gospels have not tried to eliminate the possibility of Jesus having been executed as a rebel. This is all the more so because the Gospels exhibit a strong tendency to exonerate the Romans from the guilt of the crucifixion which again was a necessary condition for the survival and spread of the new religion in the Roman Empire.

### Abandoned by God

The most tragic aspect of the Cross of Jesus as presented by the Gospels is that of Jesus forsaken and abandoned by God. The theological conflict of Jesus with the understanding of the law on the part of the Pharisees, and his theological and political conflict with the Zealots and the Romans provide an explanation of the condemnation as a blasphemer and rebel;

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4. P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, Berlin, 1961.



but they do not explain the true inner pain of his suffering and death. We hear of Socrates cheerfully and calmly drinking the cup of hemlock which he understood as a festival of liberty.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus clearly died in a different way. His death was not a fine business at all. From the moment of his agony in the Garden upto the moment of his death on the Cross he was 'greatly distressed and troubled' (Mk 14: 33 par). He died 'with loud cries and tears', according to the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hb 5: 7). According to Mk 15: 37 he died with a loud, incoherent cry. As the Christian tradition developed, this terrible cry of the dying Jesus was gradually weakened in the passion narratives and replaced by words of comfort and triumph. Jesus clearly died with every expression of the most profound horror. If it were only a question of his conflict with the Jews and the Romans, he could very well have faced death in all serenity as Socrates did. But it was more than that. He felt himself forsaken and abandoned by God his Father, whose closeness and whose grace He Himself had proclaimed. Mk 15: 34 reproduces the cry of the dying Jesus in the words of Psalm 22: 2: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is certainly an interpretation of the Church after Easter especially because Psalm 22 as a whole had a formative influence on the Christian passion narrative. All the same, it seems to be a clear reference to the historical reality of the death of Jesus. Luke omits these words completely and replaces them by the confident utterance of the Jewish evening prayer from Ps 31: 6: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23: 46). Therefore the disciples in Luke do not flee from the Cross, for in his view Jesus did not die forsaken by God, but as an exemplary martyr. In John, for different theological reasons, we read: "It is finished" (Jn 19: 30), since for John Jesus' struggle ends with his victory and glorification on the Cross. The history of the tradition being what it is, it can be concluded that the difficult reading in Mark is as close as possible to historical reality.<sup>6</sup>

The tragedy of this death is that Jesus who all through His ministry had proclaimed God as his Father, felt himself

5. R. Guardini, *The death of Socrates*, Sheed and Ward, 1948.

6. J. Moltmann, *op. cit.* pp. 145-153.



rejected by the very God for whom he worked. When we look at this non-miraculous and helpless suffering and dying in the context of His preaching and His life, we understand how His misery cried out to heaven. It is the experience of abandonment by God in the knowledge and conviction that God is not distant but close; does not judge, but shows grace. To be abandoned and delivered up to death as one rejected, in full consciousness that God is close at hand in His grace, is nothing less than the torment of hell. Taken this way, His abandonment on the Cross, which He expressed in His last cry, should not be interpreted as the ultimate test of a deeply religious man in temptation and suffering. The torment of torments was this abandonment by God. Not until we understand His abandonment by the God and Father whose imminence and closeness He had proclaimed in a unique, gracious and festal way, can we understand what was distinctive about his death.

As a blasphemer Jesus was rejected by the Judaism of the law; as a rebel he was crucified by the Romans. Finally and most profoundly painful of all, he died as one rejected by his God and his Father. In the theological context of his life this is the most important dimension. It is this alone which distinguishes Jesus' Cross from the many crosses of forgotten and nameless persons in world history. If in the two former cases there is the possibility of speaking of a misunderstanding on the part of the Jews and the Romans, there is no such misunderstanding possible between God and Jesus. It was a rather terrible experience which everyone who claims to stand on the side of God has to undergo if he truly wants to be himself and be a disciple of Christ.

### **The mystery of opted suffering**

What we find in this whole process of revolt and suffering is the mystery of opted suffering, suffering undertaken through a positive act of will. From the beginning of His ministry right upto the moment He gave up His spirit (Lk 23: 46), Jesus chose the way of suffering. It was not a question of his being confronted by it; rather he chose it as the only and sure way to arrive at the goal He had set Himself and His followers. It meant for Him confrontation with the Jewish authorities and misunder-

standing by His own people. It even imposed heartbreak before a silent God whose very cause He had defended.

The meaning and mystery of this opted suffering is well brought out in the parable of the Good Shepherd. "The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will, I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me" (Jn 10: 17-18). Man's natural instinct is to exercise his authority over others and subject them to his will. But here we find Jesus exercising His authority over Himself and subjecting Himself to pain and suffering even to the point of giving up His life. The meaning of His death and the message of His Cross precisely lie in this unique phenomenon.

Encouraged and comforted by faith in the Resurrection of Christ, Christians have been gradually getting rid of the sad memories of the Cross. Good Friday carried with it a consoling thought that after all Christ rose from the dead on the third day. The basic issue in this is that we consider the Cross of Jesus as something that stands outside of us. Life is both the Cross and the Resurrection. To deny the one in favour of the other is not Christian. The mystery of Jesus suffering and rising from the dead is an invitation to us to realize the ever-present meaning of this Cross in Christian life. By giving up Jesus to be crucified, God has set up the Cross for us. To believe in the Cross of Jesus does not mean to concern ourselves with a mythical process wrought outside of us and our world, or with an objective event turned by God to our advantage, but rather to make the Cross of Christ our own, to undergo the crucifixion with him. The Cross is not just an event of the past which can be contemplated in detachment, but the eschatological event in and beyond time, for as far as its meaning is concerned, it is an ever-present reality.

In its redemptive aspect the Cross of Jesus is no mere mythical event, but a permanent historical fact originating in the past historical event which is the crucifixion of Jesus. The abiding significance of the Cross is that it is the judgement of the world,

the judgement and deliverance of man. The preaching of the Cross as the event of redemption challenges all who hear it to appropriate this significance for themselves, to be willing to be crucified with Christ.

Understood this way, all Christian theology and, for that matter, all Christian life are basically an answer to the question which Jesus asked on the Cross: "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34). We have to choose between the two positions: Either Jesus who felt He was abandoned by God is the end of all theology; or Jesus dying so is the beginning of a specifically Christian theology. Our faith teaches us, however, that Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection constitute the beginning of a new theology, a basically Christian theology in which the Cross occupies a place of importance.

### Conclusion

The Cross of Jesus stands as a question mark against all human attempts to make life devoid of suffering. The more man tries to loosen the chains that keep him enslaved, the more he comes to realize that new chains are being created, new questions are being raised and new challenges are being posed. This is not to deter him from his efforts and enterprises but to make him aware of the fact that life is still a mystery that cannot be solved through human answers alone. This mystery aspect of life is forcefully exposed before us in the Cross of Jesus, in the total experience of being rejected and abandoned by man and God and in the very rejection having one's complete trust and confidence in God. It is the only way that can lead man to the true meaning of life, and Jesus has shown us this new way: Life comes through death, joy comes through suffering.

Nations and peoples are becoming more and more aware of the paradox of the Church preaching the Good News of salvation to mankind while millions are being neglected without any possibility of their enjoying the blessings of salvation in their concrete life situation. Theologies of liberation and revolutions are in the process of establishing themselves as the solution to this paradoxical situation of humanity. It is even said that Christian marxism is a form of religion that is slowly emerging in



developing countris. Many become impatient with preaching and want to do something to better the condition of suffering humanity, for they say that all preaching and exhortation in the past have produced no fruit at all.<sup>7</sup>

Without any judgement being passed on this new phenomenon it may safely be said that if we try this way to remove the meaning of the Cross and the necessity of suffering, it is not going to survive. When theologians of liberation preach Jesus as a social worker, as the one who stood against the rich and acted for the poor sections, they should not, at the same time, forget that what Jesus did to establish His cause was to suffer and die rather than organise a revolution. He knew only too well that in all our zeal and enthusiasm to establish justice and correct oppression there can be a lot of selfishness and pride, egoism and self-projection. It is one thing to fight for a cause and another to fight for it to the extent of apparently losing. Christ chose the latter way because it was the unusual way, the divine way, the only way that will stand the test of time and will establish itself as a sure way for all His followers.<sup>8</sup>

The underlying fact behind this whole discussion is the sinfulness of man. Whatever be the categories that are introduced to explain the reality and phenomenon of sin and sinfulness in the world, the basic fact remains that man is by nature prone to selfishness and self-assertion, that he wants to have his ways established. He avoids suffering; he is afraid of the Cross. He would rather have the easy and rosy way. Over against this phenomenon, the Cross of Jesus stands as a permanent sign of judgement on man's pride and presumption and as a sure sign of how he can become an authentic human being through what he chooses to suffer. A Christian is one who has chosen this path and this is the meaning of what D. Bonhoeffer said: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

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7. F. Houtart, and A. Rousseau, *The church and revolution*, New York, 1971; G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: Hisiory Politics and Liberation*, New York, 1973.

8. C. Duquoc, *Jésus, homme libre, Esquisse d'une Christologie*, Paris, 1974.

# The Cross and the New Earth

Seldom do we find words and symbols which signify almost opposite, but related, concepts. One such word is the Cross. Its meaning is too rich to be defined in one sentence. On the one hand it is a sign of contempt and ignominy; on the other it works out its own transcendence, being a symbol of courage, hope and future glory. Ever since the Son of Man died on the Cross, the cross has been a symbol of both suffering and survival, of death and life. The crucified God was the greatest challenge the established religions faced. Though initially considered "folly" by the Gentiles and a "scandal" by the Jews, the kerygma of the crucified God made its way in the world, as subsequent history proved. A theology of the Cross is still a threat to the established religions of our time, including Christianity. Christians easily forget the implications of a theology of the Cross and indulge in a theology of glory instead. A theology of glory makes Christians boastful and audacious as the sole possessors of the truth, with well defined articulations of dogma, and stern sceptre of authority which is ultimately unquestionable. A theology of the Cross, on the contrary, is humble and very realistic, admits its limitations even in well-thought-out definitions of dogmas, and knows no authoritarian approach, because its concept of authority is service. In its applied forms, a theology of glory will opt to run the most prestigious institutions in the country, a host of "English medium schools" where the sons and daughters of ministers and high ranking officers are taught. A theology of the Cross, on the contrary, leaves the affluence of places and palatial institutions, and opts to serve the oppressed and the down-trodden whom one meets everywhere, in the streets, slums and villages. We should examine, with what sort of a theology we Christians live in this country of untold poverty and suffering. A reconsideration of the theology of the Cross will prove rewarding and in this article the meaning and message of the Cross are explored, in so far as it signifies suffering, symbolizes dying and promises courage, hope and life.

## 1. The Cross and suffering

The Cross symbolizes suffering, but it is not any and every kind of suffering. It leads us to liberation; it is a suffering that brings about a new birth. The paradoxical nature of the Cross is that it is both death and life. The specific message of the Christian Cross is not a passive submission to every sort of suffering in the world as fatalism would have it, but a transformation of suffering into a liberating force.

Man it is said, is born into a world of suffering, which surrounds him. Placed in the midst of matter, and subject to destruction and decomposition, he is ever in threat of its own non-being. This is anxiety, the primordial form of suffering as far as human consciousness is concerned. Suffering engulfs man also from outside. Several kinds of destructive forces and oppressive structures work against man, rendering his life a struggle for existence.

Enquiry into the mystery of this suffering was a favourite theme of philosophers. Perhaps the most penetrating insight on suffering was presented by Budha who said *sarvam dukkham* (all is suffering) and made *dukkhah* the starting point of his religious speculation. Buddha saw *dukkhah* in everything, since nothing is stable and ultimately dependable. The swift transitoriness of this world and the utter emptiness of everything it contains engender *dukkhah* in the heart of man. Hence in order to overcome *dukkhah* the very transitoriness is to be overcome; this is done by denying the foundation of transitoriness, namely, "becoming" of any kind. This denial of all forms of "becoming" is *nirvana* in original Buddhism. That was one way of overcoming suffering.

Christ, on the other hand, brought to light another aspect of suffering. Transitoriness which implied *dukkhah*, implies also the growth of that which is in transition. "In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest."<sup>1</sup> Growth implies suffering. Growth is a passage from one state of being to another state not yet realized. The endeared

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1. Jo. 12. 20.



present state is to be given up that one may enter the other, which though perhaps coveted, is still a not-yet-possessioned reality and for its sake the sacrifice of the present is called for. Sacrifice of the present form, be it of your body, of your mind, of your society or of your church, is a must for any kind of growth. Therefore growth implies suffering, or one may say, suffering promises growth. Jesus Christ exemplified this philosophy in his own life, by dying on the cross and thus bringing a new life to all mankind. Hence the challenge of the cross is that we must be ready to die, in order to have new life. We should be ready to die not only to sin, but to all forms of life, if at all we want any progress in life. As Christ died, the Church has also to die, if she wants to be the living Church of Christ. She has to die: her theology has to die, her liturgy has to die, her disciplinary laws have to die, giving birth to a fuller theology, a better liturgy and better disciplinary laws. This is a basic call she has received from Christ, her founder. The Church has to respond to it fearlessly. Only then does she take the message of the Cross seriously.

## 2. The cross and courage

To face death man needs courage. The Cross, which is a symbol of suffering and death, is also one of courage and hope. It reminds us of the unflinching courage with which the Saviour of mankind faced suffering and death for the sake of humanity. Because the Cross promises a new life, along with suffering it also lays the foundation for courage and hope. Courage is a mental attitude by which man overcomes the threat of non-being. Every creature, simply because it is not God, carries within itself a basic threat of non-being. Man is no exception. In the most crucial moments this threat of non-being can overpower our consciousness. This is the phenomenon of anxiety. Total anxiety is one of the most painful miseries of man and this to be overcome by the "courage to be". The Cross though it symbolises suffering, and thus reminds us of the "nothingness" in our being, since it promises life, brings us more courage than the threat of annihilation. This courage can be seen in the lives of all who choose the way of the Cross. Jesus wants from us this courage to die and rise again as a condition of discipleship. "Can you

drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"<sup>2</sup>

The apostles faced martyrdom with remarkable courage and strength of mind. Courage contains internal assurance. The validity of the basic choice or the fundamental option is never doubted. The most brilliant example of this we see in St Paul who says:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, for thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.<sup>3</sup>

Like the apostles in the New Testament, the prophets of the Old Testament had to embrace the Cross and suffer for what they preached. They did this so courageously that we have the expression "prophetic courage". The Cross preaches prophetic courage, because the suffering it symbolizes is not passive, but suffering for justice. The prophets suffered for justice. They died for what they preached. They were forerunners of their great master who died on the Cross precisely for what He taught. The paradox is that the guardians of Law and order, especially people vested with religious authority, found these men of truth guilty, and deserving death. The most illustrious example of this is Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus was condemned to death according to the law because according to it He was a blasphemer, for everyone who called himself God was a blasphemer and adjudged deserving of death. Jesus' radicalization of the understanding of the law was tantamount to transgression of it in the eyes of its guardians. This is clear from the conflict over the law of the Sabbath. Jesus' life challenging the prevailing understanding of the law brought death to him. "He was counted among the transgressors"<sup>4</sup>: In the words

2. Mk. 10. 38.

3. Rom. 8. 35-39.

4. Lk. 22. 37.

of J. Moltmann "the life of Jesus was a theological clash between him and the prevailing understanding of the law. From this clash arose the legal trial concerning the righteousness of God in which his gospel and the law were opponents".<sup>5</sup>

The situation may not be very different for many theologians who sincerely want the revival of the authentic Church. A theologian with a prophetic vision, who wants to radicalize the meaning of the conventional life we are used to, may often be mistaken for a "law-breaker". He may be silenced by the authority of the Church. He may find himself called and committed to the great task of destroying and rebuilding. In the process of the "destroying" and the "building" of the Church, he may have a role to play, and he needs, above all, courage to obey this call. He may be silenced several times and in several ways by the official Church, which refuses to die in order to be resurrected. Of course the theologian, or the charismatic, as the case may be, should prove his integrity and the strength of his vision, by living the great ideals he stands for. This may add weight to his teachings, but certainly is no guarantee of their acceptance, since Christ, the most upright of all men was finally rejected by the so-called guardians of spirituality. A theologian who preaches his vision must also be ready to be rejected, but should keep on voicing his conviction in the hope that one day his voice will be heard and the crucified truth will be resurrected. Many radical voices that we hear today from different corners of the Church are perhaps voices aimed at this great task of destroying and rebuilding it. This brings about confusion in the Church, and the official Church, with its commitment to Christ, may rightly be concerned about preserving the truth she has received from Christ. But Christians are slowly beginning to realize that many things which they believed and considered sacred are not perhaps so sacred, but are the dead remnants of huge philosophical systems which were once used to convey the message of Christianity. So also many Christian observances and customs in this country have nothing to do with the authentic spirit of the Gospel, but are due to colonial influence or cultural inhibition. The pity is that while the Christian groups from which we have borrowed these practices have already

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5. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, SCM, 1974, p. 133.



out grown them, allowing their churches to die and be resurrected, we still cling to them, preventing their dying and rising.

The Church usually favours the *status quo* which is not necessarily more Christian. At times it can be very unchristian as well. Often the structures are built by individuals with personal interests (e.g. colonial powers), to which the church accommodates herself perhaps even with protests in the beginning. But the weight of history makes them accepted as integral, and questioning them may even be considered unchristian. Speaking of the duties of the Church in young nations Fr. Walbert Bühlmann, a veteran missionary of our time, says:

The first task of the Church in the young nations consists in broadening peoples' sights (since pre-conciliar catechisms with their sharp division between worship and life produced a sort of religious self-centredness—as if all that mattered was saving one's own soul), so as to turn the faithful gathered for worship into mature Christians and thus into model citizens of the state collaborating positively and courageously towards solving problems faced by the nation. We must admit this is a peak yet to be scaled. There is food for thought in the fact that people 'without religion', like Japan and China, have managed to create a community spirit and bring about spectacular economic progress, while 'religious people', as in India, Latin America and the predominantly Christian élite in Africa, run after their private interests along capitalist lines.<sup>6</sup>

Bühlmann asks for the death of the Church resting on ancient imperial or irrelevant systems, that she may live anew in the light of the new forces that are at work in the country. Though it is encouraging to see that certain bishops do give the lead in these matters, we have still a long way to go to make the Church become the voice of the poor, the champion of liberty and the conscience of our country.

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6. W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church*, St Paul Publications, 1974, p. 99.

Another area in which the Church in India needs immediate death and resurrection is in developing her theology and liturgy. The prohibition of liturgical experimentation was a clear sign of the 'refusal of churches to die and rise again'. As an observer from outside Fr. Bühlmann presents the situation as follows:

For years now, in India and Africa, popular Eucharistic prayers adapted to local culture have been drawn up, always with the consent of the bishops. In India they turned on the theme of love and light, in Africa on life. All these have now become 'non-ecclesial'. Christians in those countries find themselves faced by a difficult choice between loyalty to the authority of the Church and loyalty to their native cultural inheritance.<sup>7</sup>

Since to follow one's own cultural inheritance is the natural right of man, and since we must not be deprived of that right by law, some theologians even doubt the internal validity and binding force of such prohibitions. No entry into a theological controversy on this topic is intended here. But Bühlmann's observation on the documents of prohibition is interesting:

Although the documents very clearly express the will of Rome, we may be reminded of the saying that Rome does, indeed, make the laws but does not make a tragedy out of it when they are transgressed and is frankly surprised when they are taken seriously...<sup>8</sup>

The fact is that many find themselves in a dilemma and look for greater light. The Church should have the courage to die, and greater faith in the working of the spirit than in human forces and calculations. As in the past, we need prophets, or men of 'prophetic courage', to remind us of the true Church of Christ, and to bring about in us a readiness to die: to give up the present form of living for a better and more authentic form of Christian life.

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7. Ibid. p. 185.

8. Ibid.

### 3. Cross and leadership

One of the most astonishing aspects of suffering on the Cross is that the Cross brought deliverance to mankind. Jesus suffered in order to liberate others. This suffering made the Saviour the unique leader of humanity. His suffering and death were a marvellous way of illustrating, in His own life, the ideal he stood for: that of being a ransom for many. All through his life he preached and practised love, and in the end he died as a symbol of love. "There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends."<sup>9</sup> The ideal He preached was the very marrow of his being, the air he breathed. And for the sake of this ideal he suffered even unto death on the Cross.

Incorporation of the ideal into one's life is a necessary quality of any good leadership. This often involves suffering. The ideal is to be fought for and made real. The more one suffers for it the greater becomes the strength of the ideal in him. He naturally becomes the leader of those who cherish the same ideal, because it has found its realization in him more than in others. Mahatma Gandhi led the movement for India's freedom. He was arrested several times, imprisoned and ill-treated. The Indian people saw in him a great leader, because every part of his existence preached aloud his firm determination to make the Indian people free. True leaders face suffering with undeterred courage and fight for their cause until their last breath. People recognize this fact and accept them as leaders because they find that the ideal is not just an idea in them but a reality. The great revolutionaries of the world, who believed in a different system from the prevailing one, often had to face suffering, but such suffering made them great. The respect they command is all the greater because the reality of their being is more than the demand of the system. Living examples of this are abundant. When the Janata Party came out victorious Jayaprakash Narayan was hailed as the great leader of the country; but before the election he was in jail. Mother Theresa is considered to be a great leader of humanitarian work all over the world, but she had a time of trial and suffering. No headlines appeared in the papers the day

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9. Jo. 15, 13.



she decided to leave a glorious educational institution in Calcutta and make herself available for the cause of dying destitutes. Humanitarianism is no more an idea or merely a cherished ideal in her but is a living reality.

The tragedy of Christian leadership is that often our leaders are not persons who have suffered for the cause they stand for. The respect they get is more due to the system than the claim of reality accumulated in them through their personal suffering. Of course suffering is not the only norm to establish leadership. But suffering for one's people really proves the genuineness of leadership. Sören Kierkegaard, the founder of Existentialism, speaks of subjective truth which is the incorporation of truth into life in contrast to objective truths which are intellectual conceptions and definitions. A true leader should have both subjective and objective truth. In making truth a reality, in translating his conviction into action, he realizes the objective truth subjectively within himself. In this process and for this cause he sacrifices himself and takes up his cross willingly. This may involve trials, hardship or imprisonment, ill-treatment or even death. Jesus Christ dying on the Cross proved beyond doubt the genuineness of His leadership. He is acclaimed today as the Saviour of the World, the leader of mankind.

### Conclusion

The Cross symbolizes suffering, rejection and contempt. But it also symbolizes courage, hope and a new birth. It speaks of destroying and rebuilding one's life, society and Church. In this sense it is a sign of total revolution. Since suffering for justice's sake makes leaders, the Cross promises genuine leadership. It entirely transforms the meaning of one's life, ever pushing one forward along the path of suffering and sacrifice, but at the same time giving one courage and hope and promising a new birth in every aspect of life: personal, social and ecclesial.

# The Cross Now and Here

The great masses of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are a despised, tormented and humbled people. For them life means a struggle with little or no hope.

## I

At the international level we see that the industrialised countries (Europe, USSR, USA, Australia, Japan) containing 34% of world population enjoy 7/8 of the world revenue, whereas the developing countries (Latin America, Africa, Asia) with 66% of world population have access to only 1/8 of it. What is a matter of greater concern is the fact that the rate of growth is higher in the industrialised world - an increase of 46.5% during 1960-61 - and lower in the developing world - 31.5% during the same period.

If we look for the *causes* of this state of affairs, the following factors come to light: The first is *colonialism* which explains to a great extent the actual underdevelopment of the third world. Two hundred years ago India had the same amount of per capita income as central Europe. In Asia, Africa and Latin America the first European conquerors found highly developed cultures and well organized political systems situated in social set-ups very different from their own. The colonisers irreparably damaged the traditional, social, political and economic systems of these continents by imposing theirs instead. Particularly destructive was the western monetary and marketing system which reduced the colonised countries into suppliers of raw materials to the colonisers. As a result, roughly 85% of the exports of the third world countries to the industrialized ones today consists of raw materials. Some of the developing countries have only one raw material as their sole export asset.

Over the past 30 years after the colonized countries have obtained political independence they have begun to focus their attention on modernizing and developing the agricultural sector and transforming their own raw materials into finished products

by means of industrialization. And, this brings us to the second factor, *the relations of production within the country*. By this is meant the social organization in regard to work and the distribution of the means of production. By far the greater part of the land and the centres of production are in the hands of very few, and the profit from them are often not invested for productive purposes. Even if they are the benefit goes to the economic *élite*. In India, for example, the consumption rate of the upper 40% of the population increased by 4.8% per person between 1960-68, whereas it decreased for the lowest 10% of the population by 16% during the same period. The result is a situation in which luxury and misery rub shoulders. While the few enjoy very great freedom of choice, the many are deprived of almost all chances of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of human beings.

### An analysis of the sufferings of the weaker sections in India

#### a) The scheduled Tribes

There are about 38 million tribals in India. Their major occupation has continued to be agriculture. They go in for rice cultivation in the main, but they also grow maize and other millets in the uplands. They also practice horticulture and produce various vegetables, which they sell in the local markets. What is distinct about their agricultural economy is the co-operative endeavour, group solidarity and reciprocity of obligations. These characteristics flow from their once communal tenure of land, and extend even to other economic activities such as hunting and fishing, where the village acts as a group and the catch is shared according to customary rules.

The spirit of cooperation and group solidarity are praiseworthy and have played a very healthy role in the past, but what the tribal population is now going through and will continue to go through in time to come is anything but encouraging. For one thing, the few tribals who succeed in getting formal education invariably move out of the community. Individuals who can be instrumental in the development of their



communities are just not there. Secondly, the money-market of the nearby towns, which the tribals are not used to, plays a disastrous role in so far as they are invariably cheated by the merchants and money-lenders. The village money-lender gives them money and tries to acquire their land by proceeding against them in a court of law. Many a tribal has been reduced to the condition of a bondsman for life because he has not been able to repay a loan. Thirdly, various forest laws are depriving the tribal people of their traditional rights. Game laws prevent them from hunting. Excise laws prevent them from brewing their own liquor. Finally, there is an ever-increasing displacement of the tribal-population taking place as a result of the establishment of the big industrial units in the north-eastern part of India where there are some of the areas most thickly populated by tribals. With inadequate compensation paid for the land they originally owned and their being given new land in exchange mostly in hilly areas, without irrigational facilities, and situated at long distances from their housing sites, such displacements have done irreparable harm to their livelihood. Besides, because they are mostly illiterates and without any skills, they cannot be absorbed in any of the technical posts. Even for low-paid posts, like those of peons and chowkidars, they have to face competition from their non-tribal counterparts, and are, moreover, subject to the prejudices and indifference of non-tribal recruiting officials.<sup>1</sup>

## (b) The Scheduled Castes

About 15% of India's population come within this category and are mostly dependent on agriculture. Since land is the chief source of income it is the distribution of land and the methods of utilization which shape socio-economic structures. The top 5% of the rural population own 40% of all the land, while the bottom 50% has only 4%. In the majority of the villages 10% own practically all the land, 20% are middle farmers, and the remaining 70% form the bulk of the peasantry, viz. the marginal farmers and landless labourers.<sup>2</sup>

1. Naidu, N. Y., 'Pains of Industrialisation', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XI No. 23, p. 830-831.

2. *The Rally*, Vol 52, No. 4.

Whether we take the Chamars of North-Central India or the Pallans of South-East India, the landless agricultural labourers are economically tied to the village, especially to the land-owning classes, as tenants, as traditional workers and as labourers. Even those who are classified as tenants rarely hold permanent tenancy rights, but are rather tenants-at-will. The land which they cultivate gives them grain which lasts them on the average for only four months of the year. The average agricultural labourer attaches great importance to any land which he holds as tenant, but depends for a much larger part of his family's subsistence and for most part of the year on the wages which his family receive as labourers. Added to this is the accelerated scarcity of land in the village. Hence the tendency on the part of landless agricultural labourers to seek employment in the mines, and the cities as coolies and rickshaw-pullers.<sup>3</sup>

The declared policies of the government in regard to freeing the rural people from indebtedness and human bondage, and the implementation of land reform and rural credit through the banks have actually a very limited effect. To cite one example, which can be considered quite typical, there is the state of affairs in a district of Karnataka where the top officials have taken some serious steps towards the implementation of Land Reform. During the past year 35,000 tenants have applied to the government for the ownership of the land that they have been cultivating. If their rights are honoured, some 5,000 acres of land will be distributed to the tenants. But this figure represents only part of 10 lakhs of acres of government and surplus land that can be distributed. In other words, only 8.5% of the total distributable land is going to be distributed, if at all. According to the current government procedure, it will take about 4 1/2 years to do it! In the meantime, those who are in possession of the land are having recourse to the courts to stall the process of distribution. In this process the people who suffer most are the poor tenants.

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3. Gohn, B. S., 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste' in *Village India*, pp. 64-65.

### c. The landless labourers

Finally, the people who need to be rescued most urgently, namely, the landless agricultural labourers, are not touched at all by the policies of the government as regards a share in the surplus lands of the rich landlords. This state of affairs will continue because the present government machinery is not capable of implementing the declared policies and measures, and what is worse it lacks the political will to achieve them.

## II

All this adds up to the fact that the greater part of the population of the world and the great majority of our fellow countrymen, and by far the greater number of people in any community we may find ourselves suffering deeply with. When we realize that two-thirds of mankind go to bed hungry, do the sufferings of mankind have any meaning for us? If, on the one hand, God had identified himself with man all through human history, and the fulcrum of God's concern for man is man's well-being and if on the other hand the greater part of mankind are suffering very much do we conclude that the humanity of God is on the Cross? In what way is the cross of mankind today related to Jesus' Cross? If the Cross of Jesus has been a saving reality for man, can it be that the cross of mankind is the means of their liberation? These are some of the many questions that come to our mind when we look at the terrible plight of the majority of human persons on earth.

### 1) The meaning of Jesus' Cross

The sufferings of mankind and the sufferings of Jesus are similar from the point of view of helplessness. Most of our suffering fellowman cannot see the possibility of deliverance on the horizon of their lives. For them life is just suffering. Christ suffered deeply throughout His public life. His suffering was not restricted to material needs and physical hardship. It was, in the main, a spiritual agony, caused by the social, political, religious structures of the Jewish society of His day. These had reached a high level of institutionalization. Consequently, while they provided stability to Jewish religious life, beliefs and practices, they also gave birth to a structure of offices, of status and roles, involving



a need for prestige, abilities of leadership, drives for power, and the prosaic wish for the security of a respectable position in the professional structure of the society.<sup>4</sup> This led to a high degree of careerism, bureaucratic rigorism, a pursuit of vested interests and corruption on the part of the religious élite. There was need for change and reform.<sup>5</sup>

## 2) An analysis of the Jewish society

The economic, social and political systems were dominated by a powerful ideological system. The ideology was basically religious. To explicate this briefly, trade, commerce and the artisanship of the economic system, at the urban level, were pretty much geared towards the Jerusalem temple and the celebration of the annual Jewish feasts there. Landed property was not owned in the strict legal sense of 'private property', it was communally owned (although worked on and passed on to posterity through the family because of the religious ideology that the whole land belonged to the whole people of Israel, "a land flowing with milk and honey which I (Yahweh) will give to my people Israel". The ideological system kept the social system fully under its control by providing the basic criterion for social stratification, namely 'purity of Jewish blood' and scrupulous adherence to the Law. These created classes like the 'publicans', the 'sinners', the 'possessed'. Again, the ideological system held sway over the political system because the council of elders not only regulated communal affairs and settled disputes but also punished transgressions of the Law for which the presence of the scribes, experts in the Jewish (religious) laws, was a necessity.

Thus, this religious ideology expressed itself in the practical details of daily life; it reserved to itself the right to control the functioning of the other systems; it even supplied their *raison d'être*. The producers of this powerful religious ideology were the religious élite (the high priests, the Pharisees and particularly the Scribes). The last-mentioned being the most learned had a decisive say in the interpretation and explanation of the Scriptures. Since the Scribes were numerous and there was not

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4. Ibid. p. 244.

5. Ibid. p. 245.

enough work for all of them in the religious field, and they still had to maintain their status as a learned group, economically they became merchants and artisans. This meant their aligning themselves to the petite bourgeoisie and making their ideological interests correspond to its economic and political interests. Consequently, they marginalized the eschatological teachings of the prophets, and to a great extent limited themselves to the explanation of the Targum texts which had originated in the context of the synagogal cult. This led to a conservative, Law-oriented approach to life and reality.

### 3) Implications of Jesus' death

Given the fact that the Scribes and Pharisees monopolized the ideological field, any other person entering the ideological sphere was completely unacceptable. Moreover, their interpretation of the Scriptures, excluded all aspects of prophetic eschatology, and became geared to synagogal worship. It was extremely conservative and bent on maintaining the *status quo*.

Now, Jesus who did not belong to the religious élite and was therefore not 'entitled' to enter the ideological system, boldly took upon Himself the task of opening up and improving upon the prophets. He also severely criticised the Jewish religious practices as made up of purely external laws and observances. This brought him into violent confrontation with the Pharisees who looked upon him as a threat to their position and power. Jesus was accused of defying 'legitimate authority'. He was seen as a disruptive element that must be got rid of for the "good of the nation". But the Jewish Sanhedrin had no power to condemn people to death. That power was reserved to the Roman representative in Judea. It was necessary, therefore, to make it appear that Jesus had defied the Roman authority.

Briefly stated, Jesus was condemned to death not because he claimed to be the Son of God, or because His teachings were radical but because he had infringed the established and vigorously maintained ideological system, which dominated all others. It was the preserve of the Jewish religious élite who saw in him a threat to their position and power. His death was primarily a political event. It was not so much the content of what Jesus

preached that made him unacceptable to the religious elite but the fact that he was not a part of the ideology-producing-class, and as such he was upsetting the 'established system' and proving a threat to the establishment's control over the illiterate masses.

#### 4) The cross of suffering mankind

It must be viewed, not merely in terms of economic want but in the context of the economic, social and political structures which have enslaved the majority of men. Part of this cross of structures are the religious ones which continue to align themselves with the socially and politically powerful sections of society. By and large a religious system tends to justify the position and power of the privileged sections and to offer compensation in the after-life to the handicapped classes. This is particularly true of minority religions like Christianity which display a double attitude at the heart of the society within which they exist. Not only do such groups have a tendency to live turned in on themselves in an attitude of self-defence, but they seek to assert themselves in order to demonstrate their presence visibly by every means in their power. In India they exist and function in the context of recognized religious liberty, and the theoretical absence of any established religion; they co-exist with the other systems: economic, social, political and ideological. In such a context there will always be a tendency to make religion correspond to the values of the other systems so as to be able to exist and act in the totality.

Now, if society is a structured totality, there will always exist within it a dominant element around which the others order their functioning. This dominant element tends naturally, from the sociological point of view, to maintain and stabilize the structured whole within which it is inscribed and to reproduce itself by means of other inter-related elements. The dominant element of contemporary Indian society is the economic system of a capitalist type, controlled by a dynamic, westernized bourgeoisie which is either national or quasi-national.

The need felt by religions for correspondence with the socio-economic system becomes concretely realized at the two



levels of practices and of meanings. The religious system tends to conform fundamentally to the dominant ideology within society.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the meaning of the cross of mankind and the Cross of Jesus, we could ask ourselves: Is there a cross without Jesus or a Jesus without the cross? There cannot be a cross without Jesus since Jesus was the most complete expression of God's concern for men and identification with them. If the majority of men are suffering and carrying an unbearable cross it means that the humanity of God is indeed on the cross. There cannot be a Jesus without the cross: the struggle of Jesus for mankind's liberation will never be over till history comes to a close and all men are free. If the greater part of humanity is forced to suffer, Christ's cross is present everywhere with its invincible affirmation of man's dignity and freedom and right to live.

However, if it is believed that salvation has become possible through the crucified and risen Christ, it necessarily follows that this is realized in and through the crucifixion of men. It is not a crucifixion that will end in death, but something that will lead on to a new life of the resurrection in so far as the suffering masses will refuse to succumb to death but will make efforts to challenge and break the chains of oppression.

The challenge to a Christian is to share the sufferings of the masses and change them into a struggle for liberation which is the beginning of the new life.

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6. F. Houtart et al, *The Development Projects as a Social Practice of the Catholic Church in India*, Louvain, 1976, pp. 18-30.

# The Cross Now and Here

Suffering is a reality everywhere in the world: suffering due to sickness, famine, flood and to daily tensions, struggles, problems, misunderstanding and lack of love. In addition there are sufferings born of one's free option in life. Some have to suffer because they stand for a cause. They are arrested, jailed, tortured or killed. The names of Mao, Gandhiji, Ho Chi Minh, Camillo Torres and Nestor paz come to mind. We remember the Hebrew prophets, the martyres of the early Church and above all Jesus of Nazareth. Ordinarily people neither want nor like to suffer, and yet suffering is the lot of nearly everyone. In the slums and villages of India millions suffer from malnutrition, sickness and exploitation.

Poothura is a narrow strip of land, some three miles in length, between the sea and a river, on the south-west coast of India. Like all coastal areas, it is thickly populated, and the people depend for their livelihood on fishing which is seasonal. Their women folk are mainly fish vendors. In times of plenty the people feast and spend freely. When the lean months come they go hungry for days on end and fall ill. There are also some rich people among them, owners of boats and nets, and money-lenders. But a large number have nothing, and strive to eke out a living as daily laborers and coolies. They borrow from the rich in times of need and become bonded to them and to the money-lender, though their debts range only from fifty rupees to a thousand. Once bonded, a person has to turn up regularly for work, failing which he is likely to be abused and beaten up by the rich owners of the implements of their profession. The interest on borrowed money is so high that there is little hope of ever becoming free again. People in these areas work hard, yet get nowhere. They have been working for generations, and others have taken the fruit of their labour. Deeply frustrated, they have become over-sensitive, they quarrel easily, and resort to drink.

Hard work, worry and chronic hunger break them in mind and in body. They are often so ill that they cannot go to work.

Inability to work means getting deeper into debt, stronger bondage, greater hunger and longer illnesses. It is a vicious circle. The slightly redeeming features are that many are immune to various kinds of diseases, and that in time of trouble people come to one another's help with generous hearts and open hand. When ill, the richer sort go to hospitals and clinics, the poorer go to the Primary Health Centre, and the rest go nowhere but lie at home uncared for, waiting for nature to heal them. There is a girl stricken with paralysis. She gets her food, but suffers intensely from isolation and loneliness, from the lack of company and human presence. An old person was laid up for many years; what he complained of was not his physical ailments though these were not light; he suffered most from lack of understanding, love and care. But when he died many people attended his funeral. They wanted to make the funeral rites grand, and were ready to spend money on them. Showy funerals and expensive Church ceremonies are a matter of social prestige for families and relatives. A living person seems to be of less value than his corpse and a lot of ceremonial around the corpse. The Church does not seem to have a different value to convey, and this adds to the painfulness of the situation.

The parish structure here was such that the parish committee had a great hold on the people. It was a powerful body, dominated by the rich who managed to get elected to it by various manipulations of the general body. Its main interest was in the celebration of feasts. Any suggestion to use the money for the good of the people, or for programmes in favour of the poor, was promptly rejected. In the hope of effecting a change, we proposed election of the committee by the entire parish. Every parishioner got a ballot paper. But when the results came, the old fellows were back in the committee. So powerful were the rich that they could manipulate this voting too. We therefore left the committee to itself, and it did whatever it wanted; it misused church funds, was detected and dismissed. A new committee came into being, composed of coolies and workers, representatives of the poor of the parish who are the majority. The new members were at one in the opinion that the money of the parish, the income from its properties, should be utilised for the welfare of the people.



With the collaboration of the people they were able to start two nurseries to accommodate all the children. The rich, of course, disliked the move and began to create trouble. They tried to get the Bishop on their side. They filed cases against us and sought police support. They attempted to use the pressure of political parties to crush action in favour of the poor. But in the end they achieved nothing except unwittingly to enable the people to grow through the sufferings and the struggle involved in the process.

At first we lived and worked like everybody else in the area. We went fishing with the fishermen and earned our living and cooked our own food. This incarnational living bore fruit in the emergence of a group of twenty-five young men, who after fairly long discussion and study decided to start a fishermen's co-operative, the membership of which soon grew to one hundred. They started also a credit union. The poor now began to appreciate the strength of being united and the advantages of co-operative action. They saw that the members had easy access to loans from banks at far lower interest than they had hitherto known. The money lenders and the rich sensed this development as a threat to themselves. Their victims had begun to liberate themselves. Their first attempt was to cause division by organising fake fishermen's unions. This led to many clashes among the people who could not see how they were being used by the rich to destroy their own cause. The greatest tensions and sufferings are born of such situations and turn of events. It is very painful to experience the breakdown of friendships as happened for instance when a stand was taken in favour of the lowest grade employees in a hospital run by religious sisters. An action initiated against illicit alcohol-making had to be abandoned for the time being owing to opposition from the people themselves.

The sufferings and trials of these poor fisherfolk and of those who live and work with them in the hope of awakening them to new possibilities of life, have little or nothing that is heroic or remarkable about them. They are all the more oppressive and tragic. What meaning do they have for the poor themselves? What meaning do they have for the rest of men and the world? What is the saving and liberating dimension of such suffering? Many people accept suffering as something willed by God. This

is their lot, and there is no option but to accept it. To most fisher-folk sickness is a punishment sent by God and a warning. It has to be endured, and medical treatment can be effective only within God's purposes. There are others who suffer in complete pessimism and look upon pain as a curse.

But in the plan of God and in the coming of the Kingdom, suffering is salvific, liberative and redemptive. Redemption comes through suffering Love. The suffering Servant of Yahweh is a profoundly truthful concept. The primary meaning of this figure as given in the book of Isaiah is that through suffering and death something is achieved which is impossible otherwise in our human situation. The truth revealed in the suffering Servant is that salvation and wholeness come through it. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth... yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand, he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied, by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities... he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors" (Is. 53/5-7, 10-12).

Jesus realised this service of suffering in his life. The decisive question that He asked the disciples was, "But who do you say that I am?" A question, almost unheard in the Church today, was not answered by Peter in terms of the suffering Servant of Yahweh. Peter's response was, "You are the Christ" (Mk. 8/29). But Jesus was not satisfied with Peter's profession of faith. Not only did he go on to identify his own messianic vocation with that of the suffering Servant, and "to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected... and be killed" (Mk. 8/31), but he sharply rebuked Peter's contrary suggestion that such suffering was somehow avoidable: "Get behind me, Satan! for you

are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mk. 8/33). Essential to the definition of Christ are suffering, rejection and sacrificial death. His was a conscious acceptance and a free decision.

To profess a true faith in Jesus Christ is to profess a faith in Jesus the *suffering servant*. To the extent to which we become suffering servants we become Christians—we are being liberated and society is being liberated too. This is both a religious and a sociological phenomenon of history. All the prophets, as voices of protest, had to suffer and die for their stand and their vision. That happened to the Apostles too. It is true also of early Christian martyrs. To be a Christian meant, at that time, to be ready to die for the faith. Similarly during India's freedom struggle, many together with Gandhiji had to become suffering servants. Many had to undergo sufferings in jail, many were beaten up and many met with death. After years of suffering for the sake of 40 crores of people, India achieved freedom from the British. Today, once again, the price of freedom from the totalitarian and oppresssive regime of a caucus has been the imprisonment and suffering of Jayaprakash Narayan and thousands of true Indians. What happened to Vietnam? Yes many gave their lives and many still continue to suffer to bring about freedom for all. Numerous freedom fighters like Camillo Torres and Nestor Paz in South America, and several others in Asia and Africa have undergone sufferings, because of their stand for life and freedom for all. That is the only way to liberation and resurrection.

What about those sufferings which are not the result of a conscious decision such as sickness, death, flood, famine, misunderstanding? Each of these is a *moment of grace*, a call and a challenge. It can be made salvific and liberative or it can be made destructive and enslaving. The Bangladesh refugee problem became to many a moment of grace: a call to love and sacrificial living and to working hard to relieve the sufferings of the refugees. To the refugees it was an opportunity to experience love, care and understanding from people who were not of one's family, nation or religion. But to many others, who did not respond to the grace, it became a moment of destruction and slavery. They lived in frustration and selfishness. In the heart of many in the coastal area too, where people suffer from sickness, debt, poverty, one finds moments of grace. Think of the courage and patience of



of women who work hard day and night to look after their family in spite of hardships and drunken husbands. For them happiness consists in day-to-day sacrifices for the family. In that love their suffering finds a meaning.

In the face of suffering one experiences *helplessness* as well as strength and mastery. It is human to feel helpless. This human dimension is brought out very clearly in the crucifixion narrative of Matthew and Mark. Christ cries out, "My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me" (Mk. 15/34). In both the narratives Christ experiences anonymity and isolation from his loved ones. In the midst of His suffering He has a word for the women of Jerusalem, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (Lk. 23/28). He has a word of promise for the thief, "Truly: I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23/43). He prays for the powerless who were manipulated by the powerful, "Forgive them for they know not what they are doing" (Lk. 23/34). Finally comes His total surrender, when He says, "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23/46). The world feels torn apart in the face of helplessness. People do not know what to do when they are overtaken by disaster. What can one do when one's only child is lost? What can one do when one experiences hunger and there is nothing to eat? What can one do when poor people are disunited and divided? What can one do when people are exploited by the powerful? What can one do when a loved person dies and one has to borrow money at exorbitant interest to meet the expenses of the funeral? What can one do in a situation of diseases caused by generations of malnutrition? What can one do when tensions and struggles disrupt families, and love and understanding? The sense of helplessness is overwhelming. People at such times, often do not become masters of their life and destiny. They succumb to the tragedy of life.

Still there surely is a *positive dimension* to suffering. We have to recognise the call of the moment, and the extent to which it can become salvific and liberative. The more we succumb to helplessness the more we are beaten back, and become inhuman and enslaved. The call of the moment and the challenge of today is to discover the positive dimension of powerlessness. Instead of

being victimised by a situation we have to become its masters. Through the service of suffering we can create hope among the helpless and the powerless. We can enable them to discover their own resources with which to build their own future.

Our constant thoughts and positive outlook will influence our lives. A positive outlook produces positive results. A negative outlook produces negative results. It is useless to blame God, the situation, people and leaders. Self-pity is also useless. We have to create confidence in ourselves and in others. Our positive thoughts, attitudes and reflections offer food to the sub-conscious. If our conscious mind nurses courage and hope, the sub-conscious will react accordingly. We have to make every effort to see the positive creative dimension of suffering. Then the pain and the tragedy of life can be transformed into moments of grace, and growth, and means of salvation and liberation.

When God, the Father wished to liberate mankind He selected a special way. God became man. He became a lowly slave. To free man from every slavery this was the only way. Through his slavery he stressed the strength of every slave, and every slave's power to become free. In the whole process He had to face opposition and endure suffering, agony and death at the hands of those who enslave men. In order to free man and make everyone a child of God he accepted these in love. The new life He has made possible for us has come to us in and through His Cross.

Poothura  
Anjengo P. O.  
Trivandrum Dt

Tom Kochery

# Nestor Paz

"I want my death to be full of meaning"

My dear Lord, I have been reading the guerilla journal of Nestor Paz. I would like to tell you about it. Have you time?

It seems that the official file of Bolivia's National Liberation Army has the following entry: "Nestor Paz Zamora ('Francisco'). Ex-seminarian. Religion teacher. Bolivian. Died of starvation. An example of daily heroism and love for man. His struggle to become the 'new man' whom Che Guevara sought is an example for all revolutionaries." There we have a brief description of the man, of his vision and quest, and of his end. Francisco is the name he took on joining the guerillas as a sign of his love for Francis of Assisi and for the poor people of his beloved Bolivia. How did Francis like that? He must have been glad that his name was linked with an armed struggle on behalf of the poor. Was he not himself a rebel?

Nestor's journal has been published (by Orbis Books, New-York, 1975, edited by E. Garcia and J. Eagleson. All the references are to this volume). The title, *My Life For My Friends*, reflects the leading idea of the volume, and echoes the line, *to die for your friends*, which recurs as a refrain in the last of his poems. The book is more than a diary of a campaign. It is a series of love letters the young guerilla addressed 'to his family, to his wife and to his God'. They are a testament of love, and witness to "a heroic response to what one Christian believed fidelity to the Christ of the Gospel demanded of him" (viii, 12). This young man was at once a Christian and a guerilla, a poet, a mystic and a lover. His understanding of Christian fidelity and Christian love seems to pose problems and to throw out challenges to our Churches and to many sensitive people.

## Opting for death

Nestor was born on October 9, 1945. His family was fairly rich and powerful, respected and loved. His father was a general

in the Bolivian army, and later became governor of Nestor's home town. Young Nestor studied with the Jesuits, entered the seminary (1959), joined the Redemptorists in Argentina (1962), went to a major seminary in Chile (1963-1966), left and studied medicine (1967 ff), taught religion, worked among the poor, met Cecilia (Cecy) Avila and married her on Easter day, April 14, 1968, joined the guerillas in July 1970, and died on October 8 of the same year, the day before his twenty-fifth birthday, the third anniversary of the death of Che Guevara to whom he was deeply devoted. He had surely known that to join the guerillas was to walk with death. With less than a month's experience of the campaign, he saw himself moving "from the idea of 'death' as a diminishment to the reality of 'death' as fulness". That did not mean he was fond of death, but if it came he would meet it with peace and calm as indeed he did. The Christian in him saw death as a going to the Father; the mystic in him sensed it as a realization of "Come, Lord Jesus" (58-59). At the end of August, he did not think he was going to die, but "if I die, I want my death to be full of meaning, to create waves of repercussion and reach other receptive ears who will struggle for the happiness of man" (78). You are a fine friend, Lord, you are already granting him his wish. More and more people are beginning to hear of Nestor Paz and are probing the meaning of that obscure, apparently unheroic, death in the jungles of Bolivia. The meaning of his death lies close to the meaning of Your death: both You and he perished in a struggle for the happiness of people, to win back their freedom, to uphold their dignity and rebuild their humanity.

Nestor experienced the early days of September as intense and 'charged with meaning'. These might be his guerilla group's last days, or the first days of their victory (84). He was in high spirits, but towards mid-September his hopes sobered, and he wrote to You, his dear Lord: "Today, I really feel the need of You and Your presence. May be it's because of the nearness of death or the relative failure of our struggle". That day could be his Holy Thursday. That night could be his Good Friday. He was ready, and he surrendered himself completely into God's hands 'with a trust having no limits'. His was the conviction that "Nobody's death is useless if his life has been filled with



meaning". He was sure that the guerilla's life was full of meaning: it was for the restoration of the discarded and the happiness of the people (87).

For the people. But also with them. Was not Nestor's death from starvation a symbol? His opted identification with the breadless and the broken masses, with the helpless, the trapped and the handicapped, was complete. Food was scarce in the guerilla camp. Nestor had noted the situation from the beginning. Within ten days of his arrival he wrote to Cecy: "We miss food a lot, and the most wretched morsel seems like a great delicacy" (7). The theme of food appears in letter after letter. Men were getting tired for lack of adequate food; their main dish everyday was one or two spoonfuls of boiled rice with salt. Occasionally when they got a delicious meal, they "ate like mad": "It is funny how every morsel has an 'inexhaustible worth'". Sometimes on the mountains they were lucky enough to catch 'two big beautiful monkeys' or two wild turkeys, or they came across fruits and mushrooms. Hunger made them eat a lot of things that they could not have imagined themselves as eating (36, 39, 41-44, 48, 51, 73). In the circumstances, "sharing out food became one of the most difficult problems, and stealing food out of comrades' knapsacks and the community supply" began to occur. But this is, Lord, a world phenomenon, and nothing peculiar to guerillas. Men and nations of greater cunning and bigger muscles steal food from others' knapsacks and gorge themselves while the rest go hungry. Only there are not enough Nestors on the scene to point out the seriousness of this crime and to suggest adequate ways of dealing with the thieves. Nestor was ready to consider punishment even to the point of execution or expulsion from the guerillas (47, 53, 58). Thus goes on and on the story of hunger, of empty stomachs, of weak legs, and occasional meals (68, 70, 71, 73, 75). In his last entry, October 2, Nestor tells Cecy he has not been writing for sheer physical weakness. His body was broken; still he was confident he would meet her by Christmas. How happy he would be and how he would hug her! But "more than anything else I want to eat and eat and eat the first few days. We haven't had anything for a month except a little bite of whatever one could find here or there" (90). By October 6 there were three starving people in a hut on the bank of the Mariapo

River, and all they had for food was a little lard with salt, "enough for a quarter of a spoonful a day" (92.) By then Nestor was unable to take even that. He was too feeble even to get up to relieve himself. So he died, he who had decided to join the fight for food for the people.

### The beckoning vision

He need not have died in that manner. He could have nestled in the prestige of his family, and built a fair future on his medical profession, and lived with his able and beautiful wife. But he chose the hard way. He did so because he had heard "the piercing cry of the exploited", the "desperate cry" which our cowardice tends to ignore or seeks to silence (21, 41). He knew how his country was being oppressed, how on a continent of violence Bolivia had become a byword for bloodshed, a land of peoples' battles and repressive regimes, and of 188 military coups in the 150 years of its independence after a fifteen-year-long armed struggle of liberation from colonial rule. He knew how the transnationals had made profits at criminal rates while his people sank ever deeper into wretchedness and silent despair. He countered these with hopes and dreams for Bolivia, for Latin America, for the poor of the world; and he was ready to do his bit and pay the price to make the vision come true. Life did not matter if "our Latin America" could be made "a free territory of free people who are masters of their own destiny". Life would have meaning if it were spent "to defend the unlettered and undernourished from the exploitation of the minority and to win back dignity for a dehumanized people". Nestor and his group did not want to bequeath to their children "a vision of life based upon competition as a means of possession, or possession as a measure of man's value". In their belief a man had value for what he was rather than for what he had. They were determined that their children should live in a better world (21-23, 26, 46). But, Lord, Nestor had no children though he did dream of 'little Pazes' while in the guerilla camp, and only six days before his death in his last entry he told Cecy how he hoped to be with her soon "to have long talks, to look at each other, to bring a little Paz into this world who will fill our days with joy" (45, 90). Perhaps those who inherit and incarnate his spirit are his children. Human offspring are more than protoplasmic

continuity. By faith we belong to the stock of Abraham; blood relationship is irrelevant. By doing the Father's will we become Your mother, brother and sister. Will you take thought for Your tortured servant and see to it that his life is prolonged and he sees his children's children?

Nestor upheld the vision of a New Earth where love would be the fundamental law. He believed in a "New Man" made free by the Blood and the Resurrection of Jesus. His dream was the completely liberated man living within brotherly structures embodying tenderness. He strove after authentic Christian humanity, humanness, which alone could move history ahead (25, 26, 75, 86, 87). That such faith had personal consequences was never forgotten. The New Man of our desires and hopes has to be realized and demonstrated in our person and our daily life (56). Hence the total dedication with which Nestor gave himself to his immediate world of the guerilla group in the hope of making it the beginning of the New Man. Hence his joy in seeing a sense of brotherhood developing within the movement, and friendships crystallizing among the men (68, 78, 80).

It was this faith and vision that urged him to take his place "in the long guerilla file, rifle in hand, to combat the symbol and instrument of oppression", the government's reactionary military force (21). He did not join the campaign in a moment of childish enthusiasm or of group frenzy. He took the step deliberately, with clarity of mind and conviction. He knew what he was doing and what it all meant. He saw the hard life as a specific option. He saw his guerilla life as a vocation, a novitiate and a priesthood. "My eternal vocation of service is fashioned again here, a kind of priesthood—not ritual or externally sacramental—but very rich in concrete possibilities of love" (66, 62). Love is a commitment and action on behalf of others. "I believe that taking up arms is the only effective way of protecting the poor against their present exploitation, the only effective way of generating a free man. I believe that the struggle for liberation is rooted in the prophetic line of Salvation History." "We have chosen this path because it is the only path left open to us, painful though it may be" (23, 24). The option is seen as obedience to the commandment which sums up the law, and therefore not as illegal action, but as fulfilment of the law at its deepest

levels. The basic inspiration comes from Jesus' words about the love than which there is no greater: the love that makes a man lay down his life for his friends. "For this reason we have taken up arms." "My dear Lord, ... you know I've always tried to be faithful to you in every way, consistent with the fulness of my being. That's why I am here" (22, 46, 87).

### **We are uneasy**

The story is moving. Such faith and vision, such commitment and love, such courage! It touches us deeply. But it also disturbs us, dear Lord, and we have a problem. Did you not mean it when you told us to love our oppressors too, and to lay the sword aside? to learn meekness and gentleness from you and let our sun shine on good men and evil men alike? to turn the other cheek and let the taker of our shawl have also our shirt? You did not kill but gave your life. That is different from losing one's life in a guerilla campaign from a bullet or from starvation. How are we to appreciate what Nestor did? and how to understand how an informed Christian could take up arms to kill precisely in the name of your Gospel and under the pressure of your commandment of love? All the more are we puzzled to learn of Nestor's intense yearning "to reach the point of total humanization" which he believed to be the vocation of his life and the fulfilment of man (36). How does that tally with guerilla action and the "dirty deeds" it involves? (70) How could violence or counter-violence contribute towards humanization? Violence has been carried over from the sub-human world, and is a sign of our incomplete human evolution. It has been used for hundreds of centuries but its contribution to human advancement is questionable if not nil or even negative. Perhaps it has been a major obstacle. Perhaps a widespread adoption of nonviolence will be, and bring about, a major break-through in our progress towards the human. Is that not the only road of the future, the road You trod, the road such beautiful persons as Gautama the Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King trod and commended to us? How could Nestor reconcile the rifle with the crucifix, and the name of the gentle saint of Assisi with ambushes and the shooting of people? How could guerilla commitment ever become for a Christian 'an evangelical imperative of fidelity to Jesus'? (Mission Trends No. 3, edited by G. H. Anderson and



T. F. Strunkey, N. Y., 1976, p. iii). It is baffling to many to have anybody described at once as Christian, mystic and guerilla. And Nestor has been so described - by responsible Christians. Does that not jar on our traditional Christian and mystical sensibilities? Therefore it may be suggested, courteously, cautiously, that perhaps Nestor was mistaken; perhaps a basic miscalculation was responsible for the combination he tried to make, with a good conscience, of course, of his Christian commitment and armed revolt. Perhaps he mixed up the Christian faith with political ideology.

Possibly. But it is no less possible that our uneasiness and criticism spring from ideological positions of our own, unacknowledged, and identified with the faith. At this point Nestor is clearer and more honest than we are. We ask with obvious concern whether opting for socialism is compatible with the Christian faith, and are shocked when countered with the query why we had never thought of raising a similar question about the relation between the faith and capitalism. Those who never had scruples about the French underground's armed resistance to the Nazis readily saw problems of faith and morality in guerilla resistance to centuries-old Portuguese occupation of African lands. We accept the hospitality of the most inhuman and repressive military Juntas and tell their opponents to eschew violence in the name of your gospel. We often seem incapable of identifying and naming institutionalised violence and established injustice, and we tend to equate the "status money quo" (Nestor's phrase) with peace and order, and give never a thought to the oppression built into the systems, political, economic and religious, in which and by which we live. With an ideological bias of this kind and poor sensitivity to the suppressed condition of the masses of men, are we able to hear the Gospel rightly, the Gospel which is addressed to the poor, and is entrusted to the poor, and is about the liberation of the poor? Let us admit that probably those who with Jesus, opt for and struggle with, the wretched of the earth hear the Gospel differently from us and get its meaning more directly, more simply. Your Spirit, dear Lord, perhaps conveys the committed directly to the heart of your Gospel.

The fact is that Nestor himself was alive, even as we are, to the problem of love and violence. He describes his choice as

painful. He was not blindly cocksure of himself, but kept his soul open to questionings. Were the paths he was treading the paths of the Lord? He was sure when he started; he needed to question himself later; he moved to a new level of certainty; he kept testing every concrete option within the permanent dedication of faith to God and man in Jesus. Openness and uncertainty were part of a process of growing up. The agony and the delicacy of the following entry, dated August 1, 1970, should be sensed and carefully pondered:

"I had two difficult days before yesterday. We had two favorable encounters with the army, but I had to revise my whole way of thinking. It probably had to do with the violence, the commitment, the meaning of the struggle, the value of a sacrifice, the effectiveness of our troops, etc., and at the root of all this your (Cecy's) absence. I thought about it, and it made me bitter. But I grew. It was really hard to leave behind the model of the "old man" and exchange it for the model of a "new man". All growth means pain, and this is what I felt. Growth also means not being sure if these are the paths of the Lord."

The resolution he made on the same day still retains the open, questing attitude in an *if* clause. The quest is not abstract and academic, but interior to a concrete historical situation, to a personal commitment to the struggle, to the example of other fighters, and to the love he bore his wife.

"But today I am more at peace, more calm, and I've made a resolution that I'm determined to keep: First, I am in this struggle until victory or death. Second, this is the path on which history advances; there is no other. Third, if this is so, then this is Christian, especially if we keep in mind the prophetic role of Camilo Torres. Fourth, being here I am more fully with you because we are fulfilling the ideal of our lives" (37).

Nestor is also aware of the likely, traditional, pious, ecclesiastical reaction to his option. He can even hear the charge of being a "demagogic criminal", and the usual appeal to the Gospel, to non-violence and to peace. His reply to such attitudes and criticisms is spirited and sharp. He insists that Yahweh is a God who liberates: he is the slayer of the oppressor's firstborn.

Peace is the result of an end to exploitation and the Gospel is not mechanical moralism. It calls for conversion which implies "first an inner violence which is then followed by violence against the exploiter". Then Nestor turns the table on his pious critics and emphasizes the urgency of relevant action. "We cannot sit and spend long hours reading the Gospel with Cardinals, bishops, and pastors, all of whom are doing fine right where they are, while the flock wanders about in hunger and solitude". Therefore "enough of the languid faces of the overpious! The whip of justice, so often betrayed by elegant gentlemen, will fall on the exploiter..." (23). With that Nestor calls on the Church to become committed, and to be willing to get its hands dirty in the service of people.

Our approach therefore to Nestor's witness cannot be theoretical and abstract. Truth is concrete and is grasped in doing it and living it in love. We should pay attention to the total experience of Nestor, and to all the nuances and dimensions of his testament. Our task, at any rate, is not to solve problems posed by the surprises of Your Spirit, but to remain open to his demands even at the risk of our bourgeois spirituality and theology being shaken and shattered to be replaced by one more alive and involved with people.

### Something beautiful

In the journal we are face to face with a synthesis that has taken place in the mind and heart and life of Nestor Paz, and with a complex 'spiritual experience' which we can only describe as mystical. From within this intricate experience a new spirituality is emerging which overcomes the dualism that used to compartmentalise reality into the sacred and the secular. A synthesis is realized in Nestor, of christian faith and political commitment, an integration of Christian love for people and effective action for their well-being, a drawing together of religion and life, and of the two great commandments in which the entire law is summed up and fulfilled. As a result Nestor is "a whole person whose love for his wife, his God, and justice were all of a piece," (E. C. Kennedy). He was "explicitly a Marxist revolutionary and equally explicitly a fully informed and dedicated Christian" (E.C. Blake). In his soul Marx met You. Nestor

combined the reading of the New Testament with perusal of Che Guevara's writings. He found strength in the Psalms and inspiration in the protest songs of Argentina's Mayol. The crucifix was dear to him and the rifle not less precious. He hoped that his ability to love and his ability as a guerilla fighter would continue to grow together and march abreast. Swearing an oath before a picture of Che Guevara was, to Nestor, a double pledge of love: for Cecy his wife and for the revolution; "deep down they are the same thing" (39). In Gandhiji too love and revolution met. Would he too have seized a rifle had he found himself in identical situations with Nestor and Che? Would his *Ahimsa* have sought to realize itself through the barrel of a gun as it did through civil disobedience?

Nestor's quest was to 'penetrate into the reality' at once of "God, man and history" – all three, each within the others. "God is here", he wrote, "and I feel him" (42). Were You there, dear Lord, in the guerilla camp and in the history these men were making? Did You look upon their coming together as a coming together in Your name? These words: 'God is here, I feel him, I pray easily, the Psalms give me strength' are not words we would easily expect from a guerilla, from a heart that is keen on wielding a rifle. Yet they came from it, and they ring true. The reason may well be that in Nestor's experience "Guerilla life is really a convergence point of many different dimensions and concerns. It is here that the most intimate part of each person comes into play, his metaphysical being, his personal complexity... his everything", hence his faith too and his fidelity to God and to people (62). Reading a little in the Acts of the Apostles, seeing their first steps, hesitations, discoveries, cowardice, and confidence "gave me new courage and strengthened my desire to be in the vanguard, to be a prophet of a people on the march" (65). Nestor becomes increasingly aware of the confluence in his heart of God's Gospel and God's Earth. "Today I know more realistically what's happening in the history of my life and what I have committed myself to. The ideological dimension takes on all its meaning here, just as the evangelical dimension does. The Good News comes to life when you live it, and you really live it here" (77-78). There, in that life, he felt that his whole being, body and soul, everything that he was had come together (58).



## Faith and love

Lord, I guess it was his faith that made this commitment possible. It was his sense of God in the concrete historical situation and in the realities of the here and the now that made possible this deep integration of the christian and the human across long-standing dichotomies and prejudices. Nestor writes: "We are in the course of history, of truth. The Lord is showing His face, or rather we are weaving it with the threads which reality gives us and we ourselves create." (46). Guerilla action is meant to enable people, made in God's image, to win back their Faces demolished by humiliation and oppression. And to do that is to weave God's own Face here on earth. And thereby in the same action God is met in faith and mystical experience though not always in belief. "Personal conscious faith and the faith of all our comrades who, even if they don't believe, are 'on the road', meet in the loving arms of the Lord. It is a real encounter, even a mystical one because it is vital" (47). This experience is Nestor's in the full swing of a guerilla campaign: "... a desire for the Absolute, for destroying everything that can separate us so that we can get at the heart of the 'matter' where the ferment of the 'real', of what 'is', of the 'Absolute', is in turmoil" (47-48).

On the day he left for the mountains he received Holy Communion. Through the shadow of death that always overhangs guerilla life, he saw the Resurrection and the New Land and final reunion with those he loved. "Even if I die, I know I am one with you (Cecy). The Resurrection now has a real meaning in my life, and it is no longer just a 'truth'. I want to grow in depth and penetrate more profoundly into 'life' and 'man' (36). A month in the camp, and Nestor could note that his life with the Lord had deepened. When three comrades were lost, Nestor began to realize afresh how life is really a gift from moment to moment; and how relevant the Gospel command to be ready to go any moment (77).

The faith which horizoned and suffused Nestor's guerilla life continually became focused and incandescent in prayer. There is a note of simplicity in the entry, "Yesterday two of our men got lost. I prayed for them. Today they found their

way back" (34). This piece as also the following text reveals the integration of his prayer with his concrete option. "I am beginning to pray with a basis and a foundation, and this unites me with everything that is ours, besides providing me with the dimension of the Lord Jesus" (35). A little later, after going through what he saw as "their baptism of fire", he begins to pray "with more fulness and confidence", to pray more easily, and to experience God's closeness (38).

All this; prayer, faith and the guerilla campaign, pain and death and dreams of a New Earth - all is gathered up and held together in a great and tender love, christian and human. The journal witnesses to a profound integration of the loves of his life: his love for his family, for his wife, for his country and his people, his comrades and his God. With Nestor love was not just a word. Love was life and the giving of life for the people. When man who is our brother and has primacy over the Sabbath, is oppressed by established violence, effective love for him may include armed resistance. To fail one's brother is a sin. Sin is a lack of love. Nestor takes his place in the guerilla ranks "to do something meaningful for others, to put into concrete actions my desire to love" (23, 25, 29). That did not diminish in the least the humanness and tenderness of his love. He had to leave Cecy behind; but the two remained united in purpose. Nestor's love for her grew within and along with his love for the revolution. Nearly all his letters are addressed to her, his dear Princess, his Adorable Love, whom he missed so much that he felt he would die for want of her (33, 35, 46, 53, 86). "I realize perfectly well how deeply you've become part of me, that is, if you haven't actually become fully one with me." "You are here with me, infinitely present, because we are touching the root of what we are and what we want to become. This movement from love to faith and from faith to hope returning again to love becomes a concrete reality" (46, 48). After a comment on guerilla life, Nestor can write to Cecy: "But above and beyond all this - I LOVE YOU. Princess, it is incredible how I love you. Every time I repeat these words I find them more and more meaningful and real" (63). He would invent words for her and send her "a superloving kiss" (69, 70). And the last words he ever wrote were for her: "I love you more than anything and I love you completely..." (90). He could not write any more. He had no strength left.

That is all for the moment, dear Lord. I know You are not bored with the tale because we are friends, and because Nestor is Your friend and You love him. Greater love than this no man has. Nestor gave his life for Your friends. Cecy also gave her life. She was killed by government troopers during the repression of students and tin miners in March 1972. I wish to thank You for them and for men and women like them. Their lives offer us a new commentary on Your Gospel. They disturb us and challenge us. Let us not close ourselves to their call, and to the cry of the blood they shed for Your people. Nor may we seek to be mere carbon copies of them. But like them and like You may we look into the situation and the shape and the quality of human existence here and now and seek to respond to people, and their needs and possibilities; respond in faith and love; respond with presence and action and life. Our life for our friends and all the oppressed including You, dear Lord.

Delhi

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## CBCI Clergy Commission

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(General Editor)

### MEDITATION ON PRIESTHOOD – 3

‘I consecrate myself’

“For their sake I consecrate myself,  
so that they too may be consecrated in truth”

(Jn 17: 19).

We priests of today are concerned about our identity in a new world, about the place we are meant to hold among modern people, the contribution we have to make for a society which becomes increasingly more self-reliant. Do they still need priests? They surely needed them in the past when the priest was the key figure in the community and the resource person for major and many minor problems. It is no longer so, or at least this position is less and less secure. So we are searching for a role of relevance which is acceptable in society and gives meaning and assurance to the priestly life.

The answer to this search is sought in an analysis of our surroundings: what do people need? No one can close his eyes to the alarming poverty of the masses and all the ills that flow from it: lack of education, crippling disease, low moral standards, human debasement. The battle against these evils seems the obvious field of priestly work, and it seems to offer fulfilment also for himself. The entry into this field of work will lead him still further: the evils of our time cannot be cured by fighting symptoms: we must strive for new social and economic structures, break the invisible chains which hold millions in bondage.

A theology of liberation has been developed: salvation does not consist in merely saving souls but in renewing man, human life, the whole society. Is the priest not meant to be the champion in the struggle for a better social and economic order?

Who will question the responsibility of the Church for the world in which we live? Vatican II in "Gaudium et Spes" has pledged the Church to a worldwide commitment to serve modern Society in its social, economic, cultural, national and international problems.

I turn to Jesus: What did he do? What was his mission? He was, and remains for all times the unique example of concern for men. Peter summed up his ministry "... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10. 38).

Yet he did not start an organisation for a badly needed social reform; he persistently refused to identify himself with political parties which fought the battle for national liberation. He identified himself neither with the established order, . . . . order, of which he was often critical nor with the opposition. He considered it a temptation to become a messiah who offered bread to the people, who acquired popularity through the display of supernatural exploits, who entered into the power structure of his time. He never yielded. He preached the reign of God, a new world which has found its centre in God and has its assurance exclusively in God's power and love. There must be, and there will be a new world, and his followers must be committed to help building it, but it must grow from the new man, from those who have found the dignity and strength of their life in God.

Thus Jesus' first concern is God, his Father. He is the centre of his life and of his message. When speaking of his father, and even more when praying to him, Jesus is totally free from the conventional language of the liturgy and theology of his time: no solemn titles, no abundance of words, only the simple address "Abba", the endearing word used by children when addressing their father. The word expressed closeness, reliance, obedience, absolute shelter and assurance in which his life rests

even when all human support breaks down. He speaks to his dear Father when his heart is overflowing with joy, but also in the darkness of agony. It does not make his life easy and gives no security of visible success, nor does it save him from pain and death. Yet it is his support. In the agony God answers Jesus' prayer not by taking away the cross, but by sending an angel to strengthen him. His life is summed up in the prayer: "I consecrate myself"; it belongs to his Father.

Jesus shares this union with his Father with the disciples, with all his followers. It is his richest gift. He consecrates himself for their sake that they too may be consecrated. It becomes the core of the priestly mission.

The actual daily tasks of the priest are many, his responsibilities are grave and new, day by day. But he must not lose the centre of his call. His is a life of consecration, belonging to God. He is meant to be a "man of God". Such phrases tend to become empty slogans. A priest must find intimacy and closeness with God. He needs it for depth and strength of his own life, and the people expect it in him. This closeness to God ought to be transparent in his person and give him the peace and assurance on which people rely in the doubts and trials of their life.

The needs of the people are many, and their pressing problems must be faced and tackled in a competent manner. Still, behind all urgent questions there is the ultimate human quest for assurance and acceptance, the hunger for "the good news" of God's love. Most of the priest's work is concerned with practical issues. But if he forgets his ultimate message (it is Christ's own message), his work loses its real meaning, he lives and works no longer as a priest.

The priest of prayer will not easily question his identity and the meaning of his mission. Answers will not always be on the surface, but in prayer he touches the creative ground of all being and allows the saving love of God to flow into his life. In prayer he is united with the mediating priesthood of Jesus who consecrated himself for our sake so that we too should be consecrated in truth.

## MEDITATION ON PRIESTHOOD-4

‘To be with Him’ (Mk 3: 14).

My entire life is to “be with”, not just to be and to live by myself, but to be with countless things, and mostly with people, people knocking at my door, often rushing into my privacy even without knocking, or inviting me to come out, to meet, to see, to learn, to work, to help sometimes in a friendly manner, sometimes businesslike, sometimes hostile. I need this being with others, and if the bridges to the surrounding world break down, I find myself isolated: loneliness and the feeling of being abandoned creep into me.

This being with others influences me and gradually shapes my life. It not only fills me time and occupies me but it transforms me, even if I do not want it and am not aware of it. I become part of the world in which I live, a member of the group with whom I am connected.

I know it also as a priest. My very vocation consists in being with and for others, sharing, meeting, teaching, encountering people on the days of joy and hope, baptizing the newly born, leading children to the first Communion, blessing marriages; meeting them also, and more frequently, in distress and need, in pain and agony of body and soul, when their strength fails, when I bless them for the final rest. Being not only with individuals but also with the community, organizing, planning, keeping records.

I am not blind to the danger of open doors. My days are scattered, often broken into fragments with no centre, with no life of my own. My very life is drained from my veins: action, movement, meeting, discussing, worrying. I know that I should pray, and I do spend time on it, the Office, the Eucharist, also some personal prayer, but my doors seem too open, the bazaar of my daily Life too close, the din of the market place breaks into every silence.



When Jesus called the twelve, this was his first intention: "He called them to be with him". Of course they were destined to go out on his mission, but before sending them out he wanted them to be with him. Soon enough they would be with the people and the affairs of daily life, but to be "with him" should be the real place, the forming power in their life, Jesus calls them to discipleship.

Discipleship is more than social closeness, more also than readiness to learn. A personal life is formed not merely by intellectual processes but by basic orientations which gradually are assimilated and integrated into life. Such attitudes and orientations are learned and adopted in daily closeness. So it was with the Jewish rabbis and their disciples, so with the guru and chela in India. Jesus disciples live with him, listen to his words, see his reactions to the people, the rich and the poor; to sinners and outcasts; to enthusiasts who are eager to follow him without knowing the implications and to hostile hecklers. It is these small scenes, scattered words, which stuck to their mind, not as isolated snapshots but in their coherence and consistency. They gathered them into a mosaic, as it were, out of many little stones but forming a striking pattern, the image of Jesus in its fascinating uniqueness, infinitely rich and yet of great simplicity. This Jesus became the pattern of their own life. Not that their individuality was destroyed, but that they all had to open their life to new dimensions. Because there was more to him than his human personality, and his attitude towards the people. There was hidden in him this coming from, this being sent by, his Father, the unique closeness to God, all that made him so different from other teachers, that made them finally call him "Son of God" in a new way in which no one before had received this title. They found it by following him not merely on this earthly paths, but into the depth of his being, being with him in ever growing faith, open to the transforming influence of his personality and the creative power of his presence.

This closeness to Jesus, lived by the disciples during Jesus' earthly life, is fully realised after Easter. They met him again and anew, alive beyond death, and they had Jesus' final assurance: "I am with you always" (Mt. 28, 20). John's Gospel

describes this union in the parable of the wine and the branches. "Abide in me and I in you" (Jn 15: 5). Paul expresses the lasting union with Jesus in the formula: "In Christ Jesus", "in the Lord", which means that through Jesus his life has a new force. If there is a sense of assurance in him, it is not based on his human resources but he is "confident in the Lord" (Phil. 1: 14), and if there is an achievement he will not turn it into self glory but know that there is only "glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1: 31).

This, then, is the decisive question for Jesus' disciples, also for the priest today. Am I more with the people or with Jesus? is my life shaped by standards and values of the society in which I live or by Jesus? Are my concerns, interests, work scattered over a multitude of people and projects or have I a centre in Jesus Christ who, before sending me out, calls me "to be with him"?

## MEDITATION ON PRIESTHOOD – 5

"To be sent" (Mk 3: 14).

Already as boys we were sent on errands, with some message, or to buy something. At times we were annoyed to be interrupted in our own occupations; at times we felt important when we were entrusted with a serious task. But each time, when the work was done, we returned to our own world, playing, studying....

Every human life is filled with tasks entrusted or imposed on us, perhaps time consuming tasks, over long periods. Still, after the work is done, we always return to ourselves, into our world, to live our own life.

People jealously protect this personal life of their own. They readily give their time, talents, skills, but they keep their life for themselves. They have working hours, times for visitors, but this is not their real life. The division of work and personal life is not merely a matter of organizing the daily routine, the life itself is at stake. We have only one life to live, nothing equals

its importance : "What can a man give in return for his life?" (Mk 8, 37). We cannot risk losing it, wasting it. We cannot allow others to take possession of it, to use and exploit it for themselves. We must find its meaning and strive for its fulfilment. It is the one thing which is truly our own.

Did not Jesus take this life away from his disciples when he called them to himself to send them out? This was not meant as a temporary errand, a part-time job which would leave them the necessary margin for their personal interest. Discipleship with Jesus is absorbing, and his mission demands the whole person without reserve. Their life is no longer their own, it is absorbed in Jesus' own life and mission.

It first appears a wonderful kadal which fills a young heart with enthusiasm : to serve the unique cause of Jesus, to offer the message of new life to the people, to make God's saving love and grace real in our world through word and deed. But then we feel the burden : Is not this task too heavy for me? I ought to be full of the urgency and beauty of my message, but how often I feel empty and the words I speak sound hollow; I cannot fill them with the resonanace of faith. There are hours when I feel with Jeremiah : "I will not mention him, nor speak any more in his name" (Jer. 20: 9).

And there are the people to whom I am sent : they have their expectations, their relentless claims on my time and work, and on myself. I am always under their eyes. My words and actions are mesasured by standards which are too high for me. What worries me are not the printed norms of Canon Law but the unwritten norms by which people judge me. Can I never live in the humble valleys of their life without any claim of being more?

Even my prayer life seems no longer my own, it is chained into rubrics and calendars : Christmas Season, Lent, Easter, they come in regular sequence whether I am prepared for them or not; and I am meant not just to take part in the celebrations as the other faithful, but I must lead them into the spirit of the mysteries and tune my mind to their rhythms. My daily prayers and readings are fixed for me in the Office and Mass. Day by day

the programme of psalms and prayers is set out for me, prayers of distress, of thanksgiving, of praise, of humiliation, totally independent of what is going on in my heart. I know, of course, that there is a measure of freedom and discretion in using these texts, yet the frame is firm and much of spontaneous creativeness is chained. True, my liturgical prayers and the ecclesiastical year links me to the Church and keeps me in tune with the world-wide community of believers, but often my personal prayer is lost in the conformity of the common patterns.

Sometimes I revolt - I take back my life and fulfil my priestly work as a set of duties: I continue to observe the rubrics of the liturgy and to fulfil my obligations towards the people, but I am not in it personally. It is a performance, administration, no longer my mission. Is this right?

Was not the great choice of my life to be a man on a mission? - which means exactly this : not to live my own life but the life of the One who is greater than me, and to allow my life to be taken up and integrated into the life and mission of Jesus : "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2: 20). I could not do this for anyone else; I cannot give up my identity and responsibility; but I can do it for Jesus Christ, because he is the one in whom God has given us our true destiny, as "*our* wisdom, and *our* righteousness, and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1: 30). By living in him I begin to live my true life, breaking through the smallness of my concerns, to be included in the divine design to be revealed : "To unite all things in him, in heaven and on earth" (Eph. 1: 10).

And more : To be sent means to belong to the people, to be for them. Paul uses hard words : "Though I am free... I have made myself a slave to all" (1 Cor. 1: 19). Once I see my service as the mission of Jesus Christ, it is no longer the frightening spectre of a life fragmented, scattered, exploited by others; it is my share in Jesus' mission, in his saving sacrifice : "Even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil. 2: 17).



## MEDITATION ON PRIESTHOOD- 6

"I have made your name known" (Jn 17: 6).

Is preaching easy? Perhaps I have found my way in preaching. I know the gospels, some comments come easily to my mind. And there are the feasts, the various events and activities in the parish, the different groups of the community with their spheres of interest. There is always something to preach about and not much preparation is needed.

But at times it strikes me: People want sermons to be short-why? They don't want films to be short, or political speeches; they seem to have time for many things. Why have they no time for sermons? Some leave the Church during the sermon, sermon means nothing to them. They still believe somehow, they come back after the 'Amen' and stay for Mass, come also to Communion. Perhaps it is routine, perhaps also a vague feeling that religion is important. But what is its importance? Do they understand it? The sermon should reveal this importance to them, lead them to the hidden treasure, to the precious pearl of which Jesus spoke. Why does the sermon mean so little?

What are my sermons? I try to listen to my own words which I speak so often to the people, some text of the gospels - how often have they heard it, the great commandment, or one of the parables, or a miracle story. I try even to give some fresh explanation from a modern book. It may be interesting for people who want to know more about these texts. Still, it is all as from a distant land and from a time long past, where life and society were different. What has it to do with the people here?

I try of course to make applications to our problems, but I cannot get rid of the feeling of artificiality. The words of the Bible, my own vocabulary, are a language of its own. When they come to church it is not just crossing the road, it is moving into a different world. They willingly come, at least a good number, and attired in their better dress. But the church is not their world, it remains outside their real life. What can I do?

What were Jesus' sermons? "I have made your name known." Jesus knew his Father: "No one knows the Father except the Son". This Father is not somebody whom you can describe. Jesus never gave lectures about God. How could he explain what is beyond all we can see or think? But precisely because there is no language into which God's mystery can be fettered, God is so unspeakably close to Jesus: "My Father loves me"; "My Father is in me and I in him". He is like the air which we breathe without thinking about it, or the light which our eyes drink in. He is the ultimate assurance in which fears

and anxieties are resolved, where the fluctuating tides of life are at rest. This was Jesus' secret: "I know my Father", and so he could make his name known.

This is his preaching, to make his Father's name known. The name is God himself revealed to us, given to us, not in a distance beyond reach where no one has ever seen him, but as the pervading love of our life. Jesus' preaching is more than doctrinal teaching; it is a sharing of his own life, in a language of extreme simplicity, conveying an intimate realisation: No sparrow falls from the roof without the Father's knowing - are you not of more value than many sparrows? (cfr. Mt 10: 31). Solomon's splendour cannot be compared with the humble beauty with which God clothes the flowers of the jungle - will he not much more clothe you? (cfr. Mt 6: 31). Jesus does not argue, demonstrate, refute objections; in the intimacy of his heart he knows what God is, and he shares this knowledge, this intimacy, with us. He never builds a strange world with abstract notions, his preaching does not take people out of their own world. Rather he opens their world to God and makes them realise that their actual life is pervaded by God's love. This is the 'good news'.

Can I do the same? I ought to. Jesus called his disciples precisely for the purpose to be sent out to preach. It is the easiest and the most difficult task: easy to share the deep and joyful faith which lives in my heart, to convey the message for which every human heart is waiting, so that the emptiness of our existence be filled with God's love. Difficult, impossible if for me the word of God has been reduced to notions, limited to the intellectual realm. True, we must preach by means of human concepts, there must be sound doctrine, but words and notions must be filled with the Spirit, so that they become the vehicle of Truth, of God's Word. Unless this Truth and Life are in me, language becomes the coffin of Jesus' message. It may still express every detail, but it does not communicate life.

Did Jesus not call his disciples first "to be with him" and then only to send them out to preach? (Mk 3: 14). There is no real preaching that does not grow from the closeness of Jesus Christ, from the union with God which Jesus brought us.

## MEDITATION ON PRIESTHOOD - 7

"To cast out Demons" (Mk 3: 15).

We all know the hours of helplessness. What can a priest really do? He has no weapons of power. There were such weapons in the past, when the Church held a dominating position in

society, but they are fast disappearing. Even the social and moral respect paid to priests has at times turned into disdain. Other powers have risen around us : Government with its tightening control over all spheres of life, political structures, economic strongholds... The secular outlook ignores religion and tackles problems in a pragmatic manner; mass media steer public opinion in this line; the materialistic outlook prevails and pushes spiritual and moral values into a corner; the sex wave sweeps over a modern generation, mostly over youth, like a tidal wave drowning and carrying away promising seeds of a better life. What can a priest do? Does he stand a chance?

A sense of helplessness also pervaded the world in which Jesus lived. The political decline ever since the exile had reduced the nation to a pawn in the game of the super powers of the time; corruption among the leaders was rampant, the erosion of ancient traditions and moral standards threatened the spiritual basis of the national life. Lack of leadership and of prophetic voices produced a sense of irreversible drifting. No wonder that Jews at the time of Jesus saw the world dominated by a host of innumerable demons who held sway over nature and the life of the people, demons of the night and of noontime, demons causing illness and death, demons hidden in the destructive forces of nature. Even the faith in the one, all powerful God was affected when dualistic conceptions crept in, and the world was conceived as the battleground of the good and evil spirits. The best one could expect was to be sheltered against the sphere of evil and to find protection through God's angels. But in this way, the evil was not defeated, it was only avoided.

Jesus' first deed, according to Mark's account, was the casting out of a demon (1: 23-26). The narration indicates the theme of the whole gospel : the entire world of demons feels threatened by the coming of Jesus : "Have you come to destroy us?" (1: 24). The victory over evil spirits is part and parcel of the good news. Jesus not merely proclaims God's reign (1: 15), but also demonstrates it by the display of his superior power against which no evil power can hold out, whether it appears in physical illness or in the destructive forces of the storm (4: 39), or as the enslaving power over people. Wherever evil is present in nature or in the human heart, in all the forces that cripple man, whether they can be clearly faced or elude identification, all are subject to Jesus. He is Lord, in him the final victory of light over darkness, of grace over sin, of love over hatred has dawned. He himself points at his exorcisms as signs of the final kingdom : "If it is by the power of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 12: 28).



This power over evil which shines forth in Jesus' earthly life remains with the disciples; it must be so because the victory over evil is final, it is the very essence of God's kingdom. Thus the mission of the disciples to preach cannot be separated from the "authority to cast out demons" (Mk 1: 15). This authority is the first of the signs, which in Jesus' final assurance "will accompany those who believe : In my name they will cast out demons" (Mk 16: 17). His messengers are not merely a teaching body but heralds and witnesses of God's kingdom, of Jesus' power that overcomes evil and can never be defeated.

Where is this power today? The biblical texts of exorcisms sound strange in our world, yet it should not be so difficult to translate them into our lives. Day by day we are confronted with powers of evil, at times in clear perceptible forms which can be faced, moreoften in forms which elude identification : the hidden evil in my heart, in every human heart, evils that pervade society, which are embodied in enslaving structures, poison human relations, degrade men and women. Who can conquer the powers of evil? Is there any power that can prevail?

It is my faith that also today God's power is greater than evil, that this power is revealed in Jesus Christ, that it is present in the Church and in its ministries. As long as I fulfil Jesus' mission I know - whatever the odds - my cause has the promise of victory. Jesus' assurance remains valid for all times : "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16: 33). Also in Jesus' life the victory was not visible on the surface : there were days of success, days of setback, apparent final failure; but then the ultimate glory. Also Paul knew that his mission was not a campaign with flying banners. To the Corinthians he came "in weakness and in much fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2: 3). But he knows of an ally in the heart of his hearers. When they come to the faith in Jesus Christ they know that this faith "rests not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2: 5). As priest I have to learn the working of the power of the Spirit. He is promised to the Church for all times : "He will be with you for ever" (Jn 14: 16). It is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the same in whose power Jesus cast out demons as a sign that the kingdom of God had come.



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